

Drafting a Cover Letter for Any Situation

You quit your last position because you thought your boss was an unethical scumbag. You decided after 15 years of trying to “make it” as an actor, that you should finally put that psychology degree to good use. You took time off to backpack through Europe after graduation, unexpectedly fell in love, and spent the next three years frolicking through the streets of Paris with your amour—all before he/she vanished into thin air and you decided it was time to get a job. These may be extreme examples, but most job seekers have something that they feel might keep them from obtaining their ideal job, even if their resumes are in great shape. That’s where the cover letter comes in. This article will help you to assess what your cover letter needs to say based on your own unique situation.

When Your Resume Speaks for Itself

Congratulations! The five years you put in at X and the three years you put in at Y have led you to exactly where you want to be. There’s nothing on your resume that you need to explain away, and you’re utterly confident in your ability to effectively handle the job you want. When you read job descriptions, not once do you think, “Well, that doesn’t exactly describe me, but I still think I could do the job.” In fact, you feel like those job descriptions have been written just for you.

If you were nodding yes while reading this, consider yourself very lucky—the envy of all around you. In general, the more qualified you are, the less information you need to put into your cover letter. Keep it short and sweet. Your goal is to get the employer’s full attention on your resume, so he/she can discover just how perfect you really are.

If you don’t feel that your resume speaks for itself, you will have a little more convincing to do. The following examples will provide you with tips on how to use your cover letter to compensate for what your resume lacks.

The Inexperienced Applicant

Trying to get your first job can be the quintessential Catch 22. It’s hard to find a job without any experience, yet you can’t get any experience until you find a job.

If you are in this situation, your cover letter is important. Because your resume doesn’t reflect the kind of experience that your ideal job requires, your best shot is to convince an employer of your greatness through a heartfelt and well-written letter.

Your number-one selling point is going to be your enthusiasm. Of course, experience often wins in the enthusiasm vs. experience battle, but enthusiasm puts up a good fight. You want let the person reading your letter know that what you lack in practical experience will be more than made up for by your work ethic, determination, and excitement about the position. Does it guarantee you the job? No, but maybe it will get you an interview. And if it comes down to you and someone who seems bored, chances are you’ll win.

Confidence will also aid you in this effort. Exhibiting a level of confidence in your ability to perform all the necessary tasks, even providing examples of how you can, if possible, will help you immeasurably.

The Not-Quite-Qualified Attorney

If you are in this group, you often find yourself reading job descriptions that almost describe your skill set. They want five years of experience; you have three. They want top-10 business school graduates; your school was ranked 35th. They want someone with published clippings; you only have papers you wrote in college.

You know you can do the job given the chance. So how do you beat out those who also want the job AND have the perfect qualifications?

First, be aware that few of those perfect candidates actually exist. When employers write job descriptions, they are describing their ideal candidate. But as we all know, ideal is hard to come by. Most employers expect to receive applications from those a little less qualified than the description asks for, and they will consider those candidates if they show potential. So don't be put off if the job description doesn't describe you exactly.

If you feel that you're not quite meeting the requirements of the job you want, you need to really sell your accomplishments—even if they don't have to do with the profession at hand. Every job comes with a learning curve. No one has ever arrived on his/her first day, sat down at his/her desk, and never asked a question about anything. For this reason, you can make up for what might be lacking in your candidacy by showing that you are a fantastic employee who will be able to learn the ropes in no time—even faster than that guy with eight years of experience. If an employer can look at your resume and say "Wow! This person is an achiever," he/she will believe you have the potential to learn anything you might not already know.

If you truly feel confident that you can do the work the position requires, then it will just take a little creativity and perseverance to convince employers of the same. You need to hype up the responsibility you've held and show how you've exceeded expectations in past positions. In addition to playing up your overall excellence, you should emphasize any specialized skills you possess in the area(s) you are interested in. Give details about projects you've worked on in those areas and the regulations you're familiar with as a result. Buzzwords and in-the-know phrases are key. Basically, emphasize any transferable skills—skills you have acquired at other jobs that you would employ in this new job, providing examples of how you have used them in the past, if possible.

Perhaps your qualifications for the job you want aren't clearly represented by your primary job descriptions or your educational background. Maybe you went through something with your family that required you to develop expertise in caring for the elderly or managing someone else's finances. Or perhaps you and your brother decided to develop a patent for a device that dispenses beer from a television remote control, and you spent months reading up on patent law as a result. The cover letter allows you to provide this information.

Again, enthusiasm is a valuable tool in this situation. Because you are lacking some qualifications, you want to convince the employer that you would quickly and easily pick up any unfamiliar skills due to your love of this particular field, as well as your demonstrated track record in past positions.

Lay-offs/Quitting/Termination

When an employer sees that your last position carries an end date, he/she will make one of three assumptions: 1) you were fired, 2) you were laid off, or 3) you quit or resigned. Of these three, lay-offs are viewed most favorably and

firings most negatively. Therefore, if you were fired, this is definitely not something you want to point out to prospective employers.

When it comes to quitting, resigning, or lay-offs, you need to figure out whether to let employers come to their own assumptions or to explain the situation yourself. The key is to find a silver lining to focus on, rather than the negative situation that makes up this black cloud. If you hated your last job and had to leave before you lost it, say that you are seeking greater challenges and possibly room for advancement and left to devote yourself full time to your job search, thus truly making you available for interviews at the employer's convenience.

As a general rule, if you have fallen victim to circumstances beyond your control, this is something you should convey in your cover letter. The more employers understand your motivations, the less suspicious they will be about that end date. Lay-offs, for example, are often viewed sympathetically, particularly during an economic slump. For this reason, if you were laid off, you should mention it briefly in your letter; otherwise, employers may assume that you quit or were fired.

Note the word "briefly." If you dwell too much on the explanation, you will seem defensive. Avoid badmouthing your former employer or giving too many details surrounding the reasons for your departure. Keep the tone light and positive. Perhaps you now see this as an opportunity to assume new and more challenging responsibilities in a new environment.

If you've been laid off with some cushion time and you're presently still employed, it is probably in your best interest not to mention the lay-off, unless you've been at your position a short time. Job-hopping can be construed negatively, so if a lay-off occurs after a brief time on the job, it is a good idea to explain that to employers. Otherwise, they'll wonder what happened that led you to leave after only a few months.

Employment Gaps

If you've been out of work for a while, or there is a significant gap between prior positions, you may want to address this in your cover letter. Don't worry about gaps that are over a few years old, however. When employers look at your resume, they are concentrating primarily on the last 5-10 years of your experience. Therefore, if you were out of work for a period of time several years ago, but you've been working steadily ever since, it probably won't be noticed. You will only be highlighting the fact that you were out of work by bringing it up. Remember, only mention those things that you are fairly certain will raise a red flag and have direct bearing on your candidacy.

Short Tenure at Position

If you have been in a position for a short period of time (less than a year), employers will be curious as to why you are leaving so soon. Exceptions are those positions, such as contract or temp work, that are only meant to last for a limited period of time.

If you left your position because of an unexpected circumstance, you should convey this in your cover letter. Otherwise, you run the risk of being labeled flaky by prospective employers, who may assume that you just quit or grew tired of your position after only a few months.

Career Change

If you're switching from one industry to another, or one career focus to another, you want to be sure to highlight your transferable skills in your cover letter. Because you will essentially be starting over in your new career, you will also want to express some flexibility. Even if you were "top dog" in your last position, you have to accept that you will now be in the position of being led instead of doing the leading.

If you are making a change in your career, you need to actively and accurately assess the concerns that employers might have and counteract them in advance through your cover letter. You want to make your choices seem logical so that the employer has a strong sense of where you are coming from. One example would be to emphasize how eager you are to learn everything about the company and its standing in the marketplace from the ground up—something that every entry-level employee expects to do.

Remember, while your resume should contain everything that's vital to your candidacy, there are some things that just cannot be fully explained by a resume alone. An effective cover letter will step in where your resume leaves off and further highlight your strengths and diminish your weaknesses.